

Those Good Ol' Days

By Sarah-Andrea Morrigan

Rector, St. Brigid Celtic Anabaptist Community of Central Portland
Sunday, Sept. 18, 2005, Proper 20, Year A



And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" – Jonah 4:4 (RSV)

This week's lectionary reading is a collection of angry, upset people. In Exodus, the masses who had been previously liberated from centuries of slavery are complaining over the material scarcity and lack of access to water and food. They have even brought up 'those good ol' days' – telling Moses how much better off they were under the tyranny of the Egyptian empire.

In Jonah, we see the prophet who had just witnessed a mass repentance of the city of Nineveh being sulky over God not destroying the city. And in a parable in the Gospel of Matthew, there is a worker who feels he has been unfairly treated by his employer because other employees who got less hours are getting just as the same pay as he was. So on a per-hour basis his wage was much lower than the others'.

One day Rebecca applies for a temp work at a county fair. Rebecca gets the job from the site manager of the fairground to clean out trash and recycling bins. She is to work from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m., and she would be paid \$7.10 an hour for seven hours, with one hour unpaid break, for the total of \$71. She works very hard under the hot late summer sun. Then around 4:30 she finds her friend Emily and Heather working at the food court doing essentially the same work. They say they are working from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., six hours, getting \$14.20 an hour – for the total of (guess what) \$71.

Exhausted and sunburned, Rebecca all of sudden feels cheated by the fairground manager. She all of sudden begins to resent Emily and Heather. Even her friendship with them begins to crumble over this. At 5, mad, mad Rebecca goes straight to the manager and demands an explanation.

"It's not fair!" Rebecca exclaims.

"Well," the manager says. "They're working in a different position, in a different department of the County Fair – in fact, they don't directly work for the County Fair Association; we pay Sodexho a chunk of money every year to run the food court, and Sodexho pays Emily and Heather under their own terms."

Katie came from a country that is ruled by a military dictator and warlords when she was 14 years old. Nominally called a communist state, her homeland was devastated by years of mismanagement, violence and reign of terror. When she was 13 Katie's little sister Eliza was kidnapped by the military police and in order to force confession from their parents, Eliza was raped in front of her parents and then she 'accidentally' died shortly. As soon as their parents were released, they escaped the country through forests and eventually settled in Canada.

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*Exodus 16:2-15
Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45
Jonah 3:10-4:11
Psalm 145:1-8
Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20:1-16*

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Many years later that country began drawing numerous complaints to the United Nations, and the UN Security Council votes for a sanction against it. But the Foreign Minister of Canada recommends a generous humanitarian foreign aid and even technical assistance for this impoverished nation. Now a naturalized Canadian citizen, Katie finds herself upset and irritated. To make it even more unbearable for Katie, the U.S. government decides to encourage American corporations invest in the country's construction and infrastructure projects, saying it has no link to terrorists and that economic stability of the region is key for a peaceful development of democracy.

"Nuke those bastards and their stupid 'Palace of the Great Leader of the People' and 'Revolution Temple'," Katie yells. "Let them all go to hell!"

Amelia spent the past 10 years in prison for a crime for which she was recently declared innocent of, after a lengthy campaign by human rights groups, a team of prominent lawyers, and the world's highest-rated private investigators who unearthed the hidden and unknown evidences that were originally not used in her trial.

Now 29 years old, Amelia leaves the prison and returns to the world. She was elated, excited, happy and exuberant for the following two months as she attracted all the attentions of the mass media, invited to talk shows, and was contacted by a handful of filmmakers and journalists.

But after a few months as the world's attention turns to other things and people begin to forget her, she faces the reality – the price of freedom. With her 10 years in prison, she lacks in college education and has also forgotten much of what she learned in high school. Without any past job history or credit history, she struggles to survive and maintain even the basic aspects of living as a free person.

Even worse, she realizes she had not developed a social skill and survival skill which anyone her age already had. For half a year she finds herself without job and starving. Then she loses her transitional housing as the post-prison transition program only allows her to live there for six months.

Now Amelia wonders: "I have never starved in prison. I have never been homeless in prison; they wouldn't let me even if I wanted to be homeless. At least I had a bed of my own and some food every day. In fact I even had a TV. Now I'm struggling every single day and spending all day lining up for food and shelter I don't even get half of the time."

"Is this freedom? Is 'freedom' really worth? Which is better: living free and not having any of my needs met, or sacrifice all freedom so I have all my needs met? What was all that fighting for freedom for? I didn't sign up for this?!"

Whenever we are threatened by the demands of today, we resort to that mythical 'Good Ol' Day' – G.O.D. – and worship the graven image of the fantasy that never existed in the first place. The interesting thing about this Good Ol' Day is that it allows us to get angry and sentimental at the same time, helping us to both escape from the present and yet place all the blames on the very present we are detaching ourselves from.

An encyclopaedia defines 'anger' as following:

Anger is a term for the emotional aspect of aggression, as a basic aspect



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of the stress response in animals whereby a perceived aggravating stimulus “provokes” a counter-response which is likewise aggravating and threatening of violence. Very mild types of anger are typically described as “distaste,” “displeasure” or “irritation,” while “rage” refers to an extreme degree of anger associated with a loss of calmness or discipline (in the case of human conduct).

Often based in a sensation or perception of threat, anger can be considered an emotional component in the increased threat response (part of the broader “stress response”) whereby the charged emotional state produces physiological effects (increased adrenaline, cortisol), thereby producing behavioural effect of heightened stress and aggression.

Anger may be “provoked” (or triggered) by perceived threats, like conflict, or by abstract concepts such as injustice.

– <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anger>

Now, the biblical question is: Is it right for you to be angry?

The question does not have to do with whether we become angry. It is not about our ability to be angry, or about existence of such an emotion in our brains. In fact it does, and it is part of the natural process of human mind.

The question, however, has to do with given the reason why we become angry, upset, irritated or raged has to do with our perception of threat, and given that anger often results in the loss of calmness and discipline in our conduct, is it right for us to be enslaved by anger?

“Right” is a value judgement. Biological process in and of itself has no value judgement, but our spiritual process does. Why do we feel anger – why do we feel threatened? What are the implications and effects of such a destructive emotion on our own well-being and on the society?

Sometimes it is right to be angry – in the face of real threats on what we value most. Anger towards injustice, anger towards oppression, they are usually constructive use of the emotion to inspire actions and changes. But as the accepted codes of chivalry would say, such anger must be mastered and directed correctly and not be rashed out on just about anybody—let alone those who have nothing to do with the cause of anger, those who are weak, or those who cannot defend themselves.

We can easily get upset and angry at anything or even nothing at all. Often we feel irritated by even the most trivial of everyday happenings. Often those anger and bad mood carry through the day and affect other people. Yes, we want to be fair—and be treated fairly. Yes, we feel threatened when the basic needs of our lives are scarce and hard to come by. Yes, we even feel sometimes vengeful at the people or institutions that wronged us. But is it always *right* to be angry? Are there better ways to address these underlying causes?



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